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SUBJECT: SWISS ELECTIONS: LEFT-WING RADICALS DISRUPT SVP
RALLY - SVP APPEARS TO BENEFIT

REF: BERN 896

11. (SBU) Summary: On October 6, left-wing radicals disrupted a long-planned campaign rally in downtown Bern by the Swiss People's Party (SVP). At days end, 42 left-wing demonstrators reportedly had been arrested, with 3 demonstrators and 18 police injured. This incident has further disconcerted the Swiss, who increasingly are concerned about the unusually confrontational tone of the ongoing parliamentary election campaigns and a clear erosion in the Swiss ethos of consensus based political decision-making (reftel). While the "winners and losers" of October 6 are still being tallied, it appears clear that the incident will further galvanize SVP supporters and perhaps even attract some sympathy from Swiss voters who previously have hesitated to vote SVP. A recent poll indicates that the SVP has gained 2% since June, and now is hovering at 26%, retaining its position as the most popular Swiss party. Meanwhile, the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) has drifted in the other direction, polling 22.3%, but remaining the second strongest party, clearly ahead of the Free Democrats (FDP) at 15.3%, the Christian Democrats (CVP) at 14.95%, and the Greens at 10.3%. Though much can happen between now and the October 21 parliamentary elections, it thus far appears that the SVP's aggressive law-and-order and anti-immigration campaign themes have buoyed its support among part of the Swiss electorate. For its part, the SP appears to be struggling somewhat to define its message, and finding less resonance with traditional social democratic themes at a time when the Swiss economy is thriving and unemployment is low. End Summary.

SVP Rally Disrupted

12. (U) On October 6, left-wing radicals disrupted a long-planned campaign rally in downtown Bern by the Swiss People's Party (SVP). As Swiss officials had feared could happen, an estimated 500 of approximately 3,000 left-wing demonstrators separated into small groups in Bern's labyrinthine city center and blocked the route of 10,000 SVP supporters who planned to march through the city to the central square ("Bundesplatz") in front of the Parliament to hold a political rally. The SVP march and rally had received approval from city authorities. The left-wing counter-demonstration, organized by an umbrella group calling itself the "Black Sheep Committee", was not authorized.

13. (U) In the early afternoon, as the SVP supporters began their march toward the city center, their procession was halted on one of the main bridges over the Aare river to the downtown area, while police attempted to clear left-wing demonstrators from the route. Some of the demonstrators

reportedly were sitting in the street, and eventually were driven away by Swiss police using tear gas and rubber bullets. Another group of 50-100 left-wing radicals reportedly managed to reach the Bundesplatz, where they promptly damaged or destroyed the equipment and decorations that had been put in place for the SVP rally. The Swiss police who were supposed to be protecting the Bundesplatz reportedly had been sent elsewhere to try to contain left-wing radical activities.

¶4. (U) Because the police ultimately were not able to secure the entire route to the Bundesplatz, the SVP procession had no choice but to return to the other side of the river, where they held an impromptu rally. SVP Federal Councilor Christoph Blocher (Federal Justice and Police Minister), who had been marching with the procession, addressed his supporters saying the SVP rally had been transformed into a "demonstration for peace and freedom of expression." He also criticized Bern's SP-Green dominated city government for not providing enough security to permit that rally to proceed as had been planned. The SVP's other Federal Councilor, Samuel Schmid (Federal Defense Minister), had planned to address the crowd at the Bundesplatz, and was unable to join the impromptu rally on the other side of the river. At days end, 42 left-wing demonstrators reportedly had been arrested, with 3 demonstrators and 18 police injured.

Political Fallout

¶5. (SBU) Embassy staff who witnessed some of the events surrounding the SVP march and left-wing counter-demonstrations report the extent of the violence appeared lower than has been depicted in the press.

BERN 00001009 002 OF 003

Nevertheless, the images of October 6 have further disconcerted the Swiss, who increasingly are concerned about the unusually confrontational tone of the ongoing parliamentary election campaigns and a clear erosion in the Swiss ethos of consensus based political decision-making (reftel).

¶6. (SBU) The ultra-conservative SVP in particular has been at the center of this debate, not least because of a notorious campaign poster that depicts three white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland (symbolically depicted by a Swiss flag). While the SVP strenuously claims that the poster is a reference to the parable of the "black sheep," and intended to refer only to the deportation of foreigners who commit crimes, the SVP's political opponents have denounced the poster as racist and provocative, and other commentators (such as UN Special Rapporteur on Racism Doudou Diene) have expressed similar concerns. Indeed, the "Black Sheep Committee" that organized that counter-demonstration is a direct reference to the subject of the poster. The organizers of the left-wing counter-demonstration have, themselves, come in for criticism by those arguing that it was inevitable that the unauthorized demonstration would lead to violence. Bern City Councilman Daniele Jenni reportedly may be forced out of the Green party, due to his leading role in organizing the counter-demonstration.

¶7. (SBU) Beyond a growing Swiss public discussion regarding the boundaries of civility in political debate, the events of October 6 have prompted immediate concern regarding the adequacy of the Swiss police response. Although the city of Bern received police reinforcements from neighboring communities and cantons, the number of police engaged has been criticized as inadequate, not least by Federal Councilor Schmid, whose speech at the Bundesplatz had to be canceled as a result of the counter-demonstrators. In this context, some Swiss observers have questioned whether Switzerland is capable of co-hosting the European soccer championship ("Euro 2008") next summer, given the extraordinary security

challenges posed by such an event. Swiss police officials concede that their response on October 6 could have been better, but underline that they succeeded in achieving their main goal, which was to prevent a clash between the left-wing radicals and SVP supporters. (Note: In September, the Swiss police in Lausanne received similar criticism for their reported inability to keep some violent counter-demonstrators under control during a campaign appearance by Blocher. End Note)

Comment

¶8. (SBU) While the "winners and losers" of October 6 are still being tallied, it appears clear that the incident will further galvanize SVP supporters and perhaps even attract some sympathy from Swiss voters who previously have hesitated to vote SVP. The disruption of the rally certainly reinforces the image that the SVP has cultivated of itself as the guardian of a society allegedly under assault. Political observers and opponents argue that this image of "victimhood" is a mainstay of SVP campaign strategies, past and present. In fact, a recent poll indicates that the SVP has gained 2% since June, and now is hovering at 26%, retaining its position as the most popular Swiss party. Meanwhile, the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) has drifted in the other direction, polling 22.3%, but remaining the second strongest party, clearly ahead of the Free Democrats (FDP) at 15.3%, the Christian Democrats (CVP) at 14.95%, and the Greens at 10.3%.

¶9. (U) While such polling data is indicative of the current relative strengths of the political parties, the actual distribution of the 246 parliamentary seats following the October 21 elections will depend not only on true voting behavior, but also on the proportional and federal mechanisms that determine the members of the National Council and the State Council that comprise the bicameral Swiss Parliament. For example, the FDP and CVP in the past have tended to win a disproportionate number of seats within the State Council, whose membership is based primarily on "winner-take-all" contests in the respective cantons, unlike the National Council, in which the seats for each canton are distributed among the parties according to the percentage of the vote received. The current distribution of seats in the Parliament is as follows: SVP/63, SP/61, FDP/54, CVP/43, Greens/14, and all Others/11.

¶10. (SBU) Though much can happen between now and the October

BERN 00001009 003 OF 003

21 parliamentary elections, it thus far appears that the SVP has managed to set the electoral campaign agenda with its aggressive law-and-order and anti-immigration campaign themes, which have buoyed its support among part of the Swiss electorate. For its part, the SP appears to be struggling somewhat to define its message, and finding less resonance with traditional social democratic themes at a time when the Swiss economy is thriving and unemployment is low. Thus, it appears that the SP is seeing some of its support shifting to the ascendant Green Party, now looking to take 10% of the vote.
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